

Foster Care in Virginia: Analysis of Older Youth with Disabilities

Research Brief

This research brief summarizes the results of an analysis of older youth with disabilities in Virginia's foster care system. In Virginia, teens comprise nearly 40 percent of the entries into foster care, and youth age 11 to 18 comprise over 50 percent of the foster care population.¹ Many of these youth, especially older youth, will exit foster care without achieving permanent family connections. Youth with disabilities are especially vulnerable in this transition to adulthood.² With these issues in mind, the analysis set out to answer the following research questions:

- How many youth age 16 and older have at least one disability? What kinds of disabilities are recorded in the Online Automated Services Information System (OASIS) for foster care youth?
- What are typical case plan goals for older youth with disabilities? Do the goals differ from those of youth without disabilities?
- For older youths with disabilities, what was their most recent placement setting? Does this placement setting differ from those of older youth without disabilities?
- How do youths with disabilities tend to leave foster care? Do youth with disabilities "age out" or emancipate from foster care more often than youths without disabilities? At what age do youth with disabilities leave foster care?
- What specific kinds of disabilities do the youth who age out of foster care have?

This analysis describes older youth in foster care by disability status using data from federal fiscal year 2008. Additional analysis is provided for a sample of these youth.

Key Findings

The main findings include:

- Almost one-fifth (17 percent) of foster care youth age 16 and older have been diagnosed with at least one disability – the most common condition was being emotionally disturbed;

¹ Virginia Child Welfare Outcome Reports data submitted for the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) Annual Report to Congress (reporting period: Jan 1, 2008 to Dec 31, 2008).

² National Council on Disability, *Youth with Disabilities in the Foster Care System: Barriers to Success and Proposed Policy Solutions* (Feb 26, 2008).

- Youth with disabilities were more likely to have a goal of Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA) and less likely to have a goal of “return to own home” than youths without disabilities;
- Youth with disabilities were just as likely to have a documented service plan than youth without disabilities;
- Disability status did not affect the type of placement for youth age 16 and older;
- Youth with disabilities were slightly more likely to continue to receive foster care services past age 18 than were youth without disabilities;
- Youth with and without disabilities emancipated from foster care at a similar rate; however, youth with disabilities were less like to reunify with their families; and
- For youth with a diagnosed disability and who emancipated from foster care, “emotionally disturbed” was the most common diagnosis. Youth with diagnoses of visual/hearing impairment or physical disability were less likely to emancipate from foster care – this result reflects the lower prevalence of these diagnoses in older foster youth.

The results indicate that youth in foster care with and without disabilities differ in their goals for permanency and in how they exit foster care. However, youth with disabilities are similar in many ways to their peers without disabilities. Foster care data quality improvement initiatives should consider increased standardization in documenting and updating disability information for youth in foster care.

Background

In Virginia, nearly one-third (32 percent) of children exiting foster care leave as emancipated adults.³ Many of these youth lack permanent adult connections to guide them through young adulthood and require additional services during this time of transition. Given their educational, medical, and other needs, foster care youth with identified disabilities face significant challenges during this time of transition.⁴

In Virginia, the federal Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) data provide the most accessible aggregate information on foster youth with disabilities.⁵ AFCARS maps various conditions to the following disability/special needs categories: mental retardation, visually/hearing impaired, physically disabled,

³ Virginia Child Welfare Outcome Reports data submitted for the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) Annual Report to Congress (reporting period: Jan 1, 2008 to Dec 31, 2008).

⁴ National Council on Disability, *Youth with Disabilities in the Foster Care System: Barriers to Success and Proposed Policy Solutions* (Feb 26, 2008).

⁵ These data are available to local agencies from the Virginia Child Welfare Outcome Reports application at <http://spark.dss.virginia.gov/divisions/dis/oasis/software.cgi>.

emotionally disturbed, and other medically diagnosed condition.⁶ In federal fiscal year (FFY) 2008 a total of 336 children with disabilities exited foster care in Virginia (12 percent of all children exiting), and over half (56 percent) of them did not exit to permanency.⁷

The source of data for this analysis was the Virginia AFCARS data submitted to the federal government for the report period ending September 30, 2008. The data file included all foster care children served in Virginia between October 1, 2007 and September 30, 2008. The data file was obtained from the Virginia Child Welfare Outcome Reports (VCWOR) application. A total of 10,276 children were served and nearly one-third (32 percent) were youth age 16 and older. A total of 1,453 youth age 16 and older exited foster care during the reporting period.

Analysis

In FFY 2008, approximately 32 percent of foster care children were age 16 and older. Nearly one in five (17 percent) of those older youth had been diagnosed with at least one disability. Table 1 shows the distribution of the number of diagnoses and Table 2 shows the types of disabilities (AFCARS categories) diagnosed in these older youth. For the youths with a diagnosed disability, most (65 percent) have one disability; however, over one-third (35 percent) have two or more disabilities. Table 2 indicates that the most commonly diagnosed disability was “emotionally disturbed.”

Table 1: Youth age 16 and older by number of diagnosed disabilities

Number of diagnosed disabilities	Number of children	Percent of children
Any disability	563	17%
1	367	11%
2	145	4%
3 or more	51	2%
No disability	2,725	83%
Total	3,288	100%

Source: VCWOR AFCARS Federal Fiscal Year 2008 file (raw data all children in care)

⁶ A complete list of the mapping of specific conditions in AFCARS is available from: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/systems/specneeds.htm>.

⁷ Virginia Child Welfare Outcome Reports data submitted for the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) Annual Report to Congress (reporting period: Jan 1, 2008 to Dec 31, 2008). These statistics include children of all ages.

Table 2: Disability diagnoses for youth age 16 and older

Disability Type	Number	Percent
Emotionally Disturbed	425	76%
Other Medical Condition	199	36%
Mental Retardation	141	25%
Physical Disability	28	5%
Visual/Hearing Impairment	26	5%

Source: VCWOR AFCARS Federal Fiscal Year 2008 file (raw data all children in care)

Note: A child may be diagnosed with more than one disability

Table 3 shows that older youth with disabilities were more likely to have a goal of Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA) (29 percent) than were youth without disabilities (15 percent). Youth with disabilities were also less likely to have a goal of “return to own home” (12 percent) than were youth without disabilities (24 percent). However, half of both groups had a recent case plan goal of Independent Living.

Table 3: Most recent case plan goal for youth age 16 and older

Most recent case plan goal	Youth with disability	Youth without disability	Total Youth	
	Percent	Percent	Number	Percent
Independent Living	50%	49%	1,625	49%
APPLA ¹	29%	15%	577	18%
Return to own home	12%	24%	711	22%
Adoption	6%	3%	118	4%
Relative placement	2%	4%	127	4%
To be determined	1%	4%	108	3%
Unknown	0%	1%	22	1%
Total	100%	100%	3,288	100%

Source: VCWOR AFCARS Federal Fiscal Year 2008 file (raw data all children in care)

¹Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA)

Table 4 notes that the most recent placement settings for youth 16 and older did not differ significantly by disability status. Youth with disabilities were just as likely to be in institutional settings (28 percent) as were youth without disabilities (25 percent). Both groups were equally likely to be in an Independent Living placement (8 percent).

Table 4: Most recent placement setting for youth age 16 and older

Most recent placement setting	Youth with disability	Youth without disability	Total Youth	
	Percent	Percent	Number	Percent
Foster family home	39%	35%	1,177	36%
Institution	28%	25%	847	26%
Group home	14%	18%	563	17%
Independent Living	8%	8%	258	8%
Relative foster home	3%	4%	116	4%
Runaway	3%	4%	127	4%
Adoptive home (non-final)	2%	1%	42	1%
Trial home visit	2%	4%	116	4%
Unknown	2%	1%	42	1%
Total	100%	100%	3,288	100%

Source: VCWOR AFCARS Federal Fiscal Year 2008 file (raw data all children in care)

In FFY 2008, a total of 1,453 youth age 16 and older exited foster care. Table 5 shows the disability status and exit reason for the youths exiting care. Compared to youth without disabilities, youth with disabilities were more likely to emancipate, and less likely to reunify with their parents or to leave in the custody of a relative.⁸ This difference in the exit type distribution (emancipation, reunification, and relative) was statistically significant between youth with and without disabilities.

Table 5: Exit reason by disability status, youth age 16 and older exiting in FFY 2008

Exit Reason	Youth with disability	Youth without disability	Total Youth	
	Percent	Percent	Number	Percent
Emancipation ¹	85%	68%	1031	71%
Reunification	8%	20%	266	18%
To relative	3%	7%	94	7%
Adoption	2%	2%	26	2%
Runaway	2%	1%	17	1%
Agency transfer	1%	1%	19	1
Total	100%	100%	1,453	100%

Source: VCWOR AFCARS Federal Fiscal Year 2008 file (raw data all children in care)

¹Based on the AFCARS definition of emancipation; emancipation status is automatically assigned in AFCARS once a youth reaches age 18 in foster care; however, in Virginia, not all youth with this status have left foster care.

What types of disabilities did the youth who emancipated have? The distribution of disability diagnoses for emancipating youth was similar to the one for all youth 16 and older. Table 6 shows that the most common diagnosis for the emancipated youth was “emotionally disturbed.”

⁸ Although youth with disabilities appear to be more likely to emancipate than those without disabilities, this discharge status is misleading. AFCARS automatically assigns an emancipated exit status to a child once they reach the age of 18 in foster care. Virginia allows foster youth to receive services up to age 21.

Table 6: Disability diagnoses for youth age 16 and older emancipating from foster care in FFY 2008

Disability Type	Number	Percent
Emotionally Disturbed	158	77%
Other Medical Condition	75	37%
Mental Retardation	60	29%
Physical Disability	14	7%
Visual/Hearing Impairment	9	4%

Source: VCWOR AFCARS Federal Fiscal Year 2008 file (raw data all children in care)

Note: A child may be diagnosed with more than one disability

Additional Analyses – Sample of Emancipated Youth

We performed additional analyses for the “emancipated” youth to determine how many youth continued to receive foster care services beyond age 18. In Virginia, foster youth age 18 and older may continue to receive Independent Living services up to the age of 21. In AFCARS these youth are assigned an exit type of “emancipation” and an exit date using the individual’s 18th birthday even though they continue to receive Independent Living services from their local agency. Therefore, it was necessary to perform additional analyses to determine how many of these youth were still receiving foster care services and how many had actually left foster care at age 18.

To determine how many youth were still receiving services, we randomly sampled 75 “emancipated” youth from each of the disability and non-disability groups for a total of 150 youth. We abstracted detailed disability data from the demographics section of the Online Automated Services Information System (OASIS version 3.4.2) as well as whether a service plan was recorded for the youth. In addition, for both groups we abstracted (from OASIS) the most recent placement setting, and if applicable: date of discharge, the discharge status and type of discharge.

In examining the number of youth with service plans, a total of 10 youth (7 percent) did not have a service plan or record of services in OASIS. The likelihood of having a service plan did not differ by disability status.

Using the abstracted date of discharge and AFCARS date of birth, we calculated the youths’ age at discharge (if applicable). We hypothesized that youth with disabilities would be discharged on average at a later age due to their potential need for more supervision and assistance in transitioning to the responsibilities of adulthood. The mean age at discharge for both groups was 18 years and 6 months. Statistical tests showed no significant differences in age at discharge between youths with and without disabilities.

Youth with disabilities were more likely to continue to receive foster care services after age 18 (37 percent) than were youth without disabilities (25 percent). We examined the types of disabilities that were recorded in OASIS and recoded the disabilities to “no diagnosed disability,” “physical only,” “mental only,” and “both physical and mental.” For those youth with disabilities, the type of disability did not affect the likelihood of the youth remaining in care.

Table 7 shows the how the youth in the sample exited foster care by their disability status. Youth with disabilities were much less likely to reunify with their families (1 percent) than youth without disabilities (16 percent). However we found no difference in the proportion of youth emancipating from each group.

Table 7: Exit reason by disability status, sample of foster youth

Exit reason	Youth with disability	Youth without disability	Total Youth	
	Percent	Percent	Number	Percent
Remain in care	37%	25%	46	31%
Emancipation ¹	53%	47%	77	51%
Agency transfer	3%	4%	5	3%
Reunification	1%	16%	16	11%
Adoption	1%	0%	1	1%
To relative	3%	5%	3	2%
Runaway/unknown	1%	1%	2	1%
Total	100%	100%	150	100%

Source: OASIS version 3.4.2

¹Note: The definition of “emancipation” only includes youth who have been discharged or voluntarily left care at age 18 or older.